

## **Report on Visit to Fastiv, Ukraine**

By Jonathan J. Rikoon

On Wednesday, September 14, 2011, I attended the dedication of an updated memorial plaque at this site. I was accompanied by Matt Stafford of the U.S. Embassy in Kiev, as well as a translator and driver supplied by the Embassy.

The Fastiv Jewish community was established in the seventeenth century and has been associated with the development of Hasidism. There is a legend that the Baal Shem Tov (founder of the Hasidic movement) spent considerable time in Fastiv and, from 1772 to 1776, the mentor of the community was Rabbi Avraham Ha-Malach, the son of Rabbi Dov Ber from Mezhrich, and part of my visit involved his tomb (see below). The Jews of Fastiv suffered from pogroms on several occasions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During the German occupation, the adult Jewish population was mostly removed to Belaya Tserkov, while a special ghetto was constructed for children. Later, in Fastiv itself, the population of the children's ghetto was slaughtered together with refugees from Zhitomir and residents of Kadlubista. After the war, the Jewish community reconstituted, and we met with the current leaders.

The site is quite large and includes two mass graves (one for adults, one for children) that have each been covered with a concrete slab and surrounded with a low protective fence for decades. There is a Russian-language plaque embedded in the slab covering the adult mass grave.

The site includes a large hill. According to the oral testimony of a witness who spoke at the ceremony, after the Red Army was overrun the Germans established heavy machine guns at the top of the hill, pointing down. They rounded up the local Jews, forced them to remove their clothes, climb the hill and then turn so their backs were facing the machine guns. As they were shot, they rolled down the hill. POWs (presumably from the Red Army, Ukrainians or Russians) were then compelled to bury the bodies in mass graves at the bottom of the hill, which is where they are still located. Many of the Jews were merely wounded, and the POWs finished the job the Nazis had started.

The site is near a middle school known as Fastiv School No. 4. Since the war, that school has taken upon itself the responsibility of preserving and memorializing the site. In addition to the actual mass grave, there is a central landscaped walkway leading to the memorial. The Soviet-era memorial, in Russian, does not identify the ethnicity or reason that the victims were killed. It reads: "Here lie the residents of the city of Fastiv murdered by the German-fascist invaders in the years 1941-1942." It is nonetheless an imposing acknowledgement. The grass is well-tended and there are a number of large trees providing shade.

The new memorial plaque identifies the victims as Jews and the reason they were killed. It acknowledges the support of the Commission for the project.

Speakers included Josef Zissels, who is Chairman of the VAAD (Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine); Philip Carmel, Executive Director of Lo

Tishkach Foundation, whose recent survey led to the new memorialization; the Mayor of the town; the founder of the local post-war Jewish community; the current president of that community (both of whom described having grown up in the immediate aftermath of the massacre); the elderly eyewitness to whom I referred earlier; and a student from school No. 4. The student spoke of the massacre and the treatment of Jews by the Nazis; the school has included this as part of its curriculum. Two other students of school No. 4 laid wreaths after the first student finished speaking.

The VAAD handed out award plaques to the principal of the school, the mayor, the founder of the Jewish community and its president.

After the ceremony, Mr. Carmel and I visited the Fastiv II site, which is a mass grave marker within the Jewish cemetery. This has not yet been engraved with the names of the victims, and that effort is in process. The main purpose of visiting the cemetery was to investigate the complaints of the Jewish community regarding vandalism at the pavilion recently erected over the tomb of the Hasidic leader known as Avraham HaMalach. I have subsequently corresponded with the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine and with the head of the Asra Kadisha organization regarding that issue.